

Capturing the Beat Moment: Cultural Politics and the Poetics of Presence

By Erik Mortensen

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“Being as Now has been reinvented,
I have devised a new now
Entering the real Now
At last
Which is now.”

—Allen Ginsberg, “Bad Poem”

According to thirteenth-century Japanese Zen Master Dōgen Zenji, founder of the Sōtō lineage of Zen Buddhism, there are 6,400,099,180 moments in a single day. Each of these moments presents us with an opportunity to realize the fleeting impermanence of time’s true nature and to practice what Indian Buddhist philosopher-patriarch Nāgārjuna calls the “flux of arising and decaying” (Katagiri 3). Since the late-1950s, Buddhism’s discourse of radical presentism has become a commonplace in the West, manifesting itself in a bewildering array of syncretic practices that cohere around the ritualized and repetitive act of returning to “the fact that we find ourselves, always, in a certain time, in a certain body, living a certain kind of life” (Cook 53). Increasingly too, postwar Anglo-American critical theory has turned to the terrain of the everyday, a realm at once familiar, mundane and so transparently obvious as to be scarcely worthy of comment and yet which, paradoxically, appears largely invisible to the analytic tools of orthodox academic disciplines such as sociology and ethnography.¹ Although the traditions of “everyday life studies” and Buddhism bring very different modalities to bear on this quotidian ground, both have emerged as powerful counter-narratives to the spectacle of global capital’s ever-more intimate colonization of the spaces and moments of our daily lives.

All of which serves, I hope, as a handy introduction to the central premise of Erik Mortensen’s *Capturing the Beat Moment: Cultural Politics and the Poetics of Presence*, a theoretically savvy if often unsatisfying study of the multiple and ambiguous relationships between Beat writers and their articulations of an “evanescent present” (1). For Mortensen, the Beat project of capturing the moment occupies a liminal middle ground between the modernist conceits of a subject grounded by embodied experience (yet always trending towards fantasies of utopian totality), and the claims of a postmodern subject teetering on the brink of a decentered and dispersed incoherence. In this view, the Beats are “early-postmodernists,” riding “the cusp of the modern-postmodern split.” They stake out a both/and positionality that incorporates modernist

¹ See for example; Michael E. Gardiner, *Critiques of Everyday Life* (London: Routledge, 2000); Stephen Johnstone, *The Everyday: Documents of Contemporary Art* (London: Whitechapel, 2008); Ben Highmore, *Everyday Life and Cultural Theory: An Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2002); Ben Highmore, ed. *The Everyday Life Reader* (London: Routledge, 2002); Michael Sheringham, *Everyday Life: Theories and Practices from Surrealism to the Present* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2006).

conceptions of language derived from corporeality *and* the postmodern desire to transcend that corporeality in favor of new and experimental configurations of experience (8).

Contemporary scholarship on the Beats, Mortensen reminds us, tends to fall into one of three broad categories; the single author study, the broader thematic treatment such as Michael Davidson's *The San Francisco Renaissance*, and the cross-disciplinary inquiry exemplified by studies such as Daniel Belgrad's *The Culture of Spontaneity*. Mortensen includes *Capturing the Beat Moment* within the second of these traditions and suggests that, "there are payoffs to studying authors as groups rather than as individuals." One of these payoffs is that we get to understand "how a concept, current in the culture at large, gets reworked by a specific group with specific interests" (9). He asserts that his critical engagement with an expanded Beat canon represents a break from previous Beat scholarship, and boldly suggests that this approach not only promises to "yield a better understanding of the Beat moment and its place in postwar literary and cultural history but will likewise allow for a more fruitful conception of how Beat thinking on the moment might be utilized for everyday lived, existence" (10).

Each of Mortensen's five chapters revolves around representative thematic examples that are carefully framed within terms he establishes in his introduction. Beat writers exemplify an early-postmodern subjectivity in action and they share both the modernist predilection for totalizing grand narratives and the postmodern concern with subject-less undecidability and relativism. Mortensen's liminal Beat subject, tacking back and forth across the edge of early-postmodern cultural modalities, is a vividly rendered organizing figure and is deployed as such in all of his chapters and across the full range of his examples. Whether attempting to escape the "readymade schemes" of the postwar corporate-liberal organization of time and space (chapter 1), forging ways to mobilize the epiphanal moment as a visionary repertoire to be used in the future (chapter 2), using orgasm to return to and also transcend the body (chapter 3), exploiting the gap between photographic representations and their textual supplements to enact memory (chapter 4), or by anticipating the heterotopic social practices of 1960s countercultural groups (chapter 5), this subject relentlessly reimagines "how to stay open to the new without settling into one particular outlook or becoming enmeshed in the desire for continual novelty" (57).

Take the trope of orgasm for example, which Mortensen explores in the third chapter, "Immanence and Transcendence: Reich, Orgasm and the Body." Both the early-postmodern Beat emphasis on embodiment—the "body is the site of modernist wholeness and totality par excellence," after all—and the desire to transcend the body via a "belief in openness and multiplicity that is a hallmark of the postmodern," are manifested through a moment of orgasm that simultaneously essentializes and relativizes the body (86). Ejaculation and conception are grounded by modernist frameworks such as myth; here Mortensen suggests that William Carlos Williams's *Kora In Hell: Improvisations* privileges the role of the author-hero and Kora's own role as bringer of life, a reading he supports with Stuart Davis's cover art of sperm and egg used for the 1920 edition of the book. Williams and Davis represent a modernist agenda that turns "artistic production into a singular act of will that is nevertheless reproduced across moments of history" (89). The postmodern orgasm transcends the gross materiality of the body, relativizing it as an ungrounded and fragmentary figure. For Mortensen, Andres Serrano's 1989 photograph "Untitled VII (Ejaculate in Trajectory)" is the paradigmatic decontextualized postmodern body, literally and metaphorically floating free of the anchoring certainties of earlier modernist

generative myth, now a figure of difference rather than of essentialism. Characteristically, Beat depictions of orgasm assume both figural qualities at once. The cover of Gregory Corso's 1959 poetry collection *Long Live Man*, features a photograph of the Crab Nebula that ambiguously conflates both "sperm and firmament" and is "characteristic of Corso's desire to elevate the moment of orgasm to cosmic significance" (91). Likewise, Corso's first poem "Man" not only essentializes masculinity in terms of biological heritage but grants man the power to overcome biology through the "magic wand" of a penis "that drives the species forward in a never-ending process of building, unbuilding, rebuilding that knows no teleological end." Thus Beat writing on orgasm reveals the influence of both a Reichian insistence on orgasm as the essential recuperative act of return to an authentic body *and* adds orgasm to the repertoire of practices mobilized by the Deleuzian Body without Organs. Orgasm becomes, in this reading, "the most essential act a human male can perform and the most transcendent" (92).

Mortensen casts an impressively wide net in *Capturing the Beat Moment*. He offers the usual lengthy treatments of the traditional Beat triumvirate of Kerouac, Ginsberg and Burroughs along with a largely familiar supporting cast of "other" Beats (Corso, Baraka, di Prima, Jones, Johnson, Vega, Kandel etc.). But it is his willingness to engage with a diverse swath of ideas and examples drawn from critical theorists and philosophers as varied as Heidegger, Lukacs, Merleau-Ponty, Deleuze and Guattari, Benjamin, Jameson, Lyotard and Barthes that can best be read as evidence for the emerging critical legitimacy of recent Beat scholarship and its alignment with the discourses of academic theory.

At times however, this eclecticism muddies rather than clarifies Mortensen's theoretical waters and lends a haphazard quality to his argument. For example, he periodizes the Beat moment as "early-postmodern" but never consistently addresses the important questions this maneuver raises. What of the relationship between early-postmodern Beat writing and the genealogies of modernism itself? As Marjorie Perloff suggests, here at the dawn of the twenty-first century, "it is the variety of modernisms that strikes us; indeed, the 'totalization' often attributed to modernism belongs much less to the literature of modernism than to its theorists" (quoted in Wallace 3). Perhaps Mortensen's acknowledgement of these wider debates, or at the very least an explicit concession that his usage of the modern/postmodern rubric admits something of what Rob Wallace terms "strategic essentialism" might have added a useful caveat to some of his broader claims (3). What too of the possibility, raised by postmodern thinkers such as David Harvey, Zygmunt Bauman and others, that the presentism of the early-postmodern can be tied to the emergence in the West of a particular *form* of postwar consumer capitalism?² Curiously given Mortensen's arguments elsewhere in the book, he never really explores this context, although tantalizingly he does skirt it on occasion, suggesting that the Beat affinity for Zen Buddhism in this period stems primarily from Zen's resistance to institutionalization, its emphasis on the experiential and its resonance with antimaterialism (74). A passing reference to Belgrad's linkage of Zen and spontaneity merely suggests that Mortensen has missed a wider opportunity to tie the Beat poetics of presence to a thorough contextual frame that understands the connections between aesthetic forms and the social and economic formations of which they are a part. In the final analysis then, his use of the rubric of modern and postmodern remains under-theorized, which is surely an important drawback for a study as ambitious as this.

² See Bertens, chapter 10 for a useful overview of these debates.

Despite these caveats, I found much to like about *Capturing the Beat Moment*. In particular, the emphasis Mortensen places on spatial and temporal issues in Beat writing is refreshing and duly expands the range of theoretical registers now brought to bear in the field. These raise vitally important new directions for Beat scholarship. A couple of obvious questions present themselves. Given the oft remarked upon qualities of orality and performativity in Beat writing, how might we understand the relationship between Mortensen's poetics of presence and practices such as improvisation? And if the Beats do "desire to live and write the present as it continually unfolds through space and time," then what does it mean to talk of "the present" in this way, and what does "living" and "writing" this present moment feel and look like (1)? In beginning to sketch out speculative lines of inquiry such as these, Mortensen treads a characteristically ambiguous line; a poetics of presence is a poetics that regards moments as both ordinary and yet filled too with immanent, perhaps even transcendent, possibility "for a new trajectory into the void, a chance to change the direction of one's life" (83). As an example of this, he cites women Beat writers such as Diane di Prima and Hettie Jones and their negotiation of the highly gendered space of 1950s domesticity, hinting in the process at a positively de Certeauvian understanding of everyday life riddled with the complex, heterogeneous traces and inscriptions of social and economic histories that are intimately tied to the ordinary experience and practices of bodies, acting and being acted upon (34-41).

"Everyday life invites a kind of theorizing that throws our most cherished *theoretical* values and practices into crisis," writes critic Ben Highmore in his introduction to *The Everyday Life Reader*. Can 'theory' be "found [in] the pages of a novel, in a suggestive passage of description in an autobiography, or in the street games of children? What if theory (the kind that is designated as such) was beneficial for attending to the everyday, not via its systematic interrogations, but through its poetics, its ability to render the familiar strange?" (Highmore, *Reader*, 3). For this reviewer, the final value of Mortensen's book lies precisely in the possibilities it raises for this kind of rethinking of the relationship among Beat writing, the lived terrain of the everyday, and a poetics that performs a form of attention to the moment-by-moment flux of daily life. If, as Mortensen puts it, the "current social situation is in many ways merely an intensification of the beliefs and constructs developed in the postwar era that serve to cut everyone off from truly experiencing the world," then perhaps a renewed commitment to a Beat poetics of presence can make intelligible our own estranged, inauthentic and ever-mutable historical moment (16)?

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